

# Defeating Terrorism by Winning Hearts & Minds

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**Students from the Al-Horiya Primary School** swarm around 1st Lt. Chris Mercer. The engineer arrived to discuss upcoming renovation work sponsored by Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa in Djibouti. The renovation is one of many military projects designed to improve the quality of life and win the hearts and minds of Africans as a means of thwarting terrorism in the region.



by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts  
photos by Master Sgt. John Lasky

As 1st Lt. Chris Mercer braked before entering the gates of a primary school in Djibouti, a local bus driver with a weathered face stopped beside him and smiled, yelling through the open window, “Osama is coming to Djibouti. Problem for you, yes?”

The young Air Force civil engineer responded politely with a slight matter-of-fact smile and carefully maneuvered his white sport utility vehicle around the bus and through the narrow gates of the newly renovated school.

The soft-spoken native of El Dorado, Kan., said he wasn’t sure if the driver was asking a question or providing a friendly statement of general warning. He was certain, however, about why he was in the Horn of Africa. He serves as part of an international military coalition to establish peace and stability, and thereby prevent the seed of terrorism from being planted and taking root.

“We’re doing some really great things out here,” he said of the wide range of quality-of-life projects and training undergone over the past two years by Combined Joint Task Force — Horn of Africa. About 50 Airmen have joined more than 1,400 service-members from a host of other nations in endeavors such as vaccinating camels, constructing bridges, digging wells and training African troops in ways to counter the spread of terrorism across their borders. On average, a project is completed every three days.

The area of operations is as broad as its goal. CJTF-HOA includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen — equivalent to almost 70 percent of the continental United States.

One of the main ways of reaching out to such a



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vast audience is through renovating schools, where efforts touch the lives of future adults and leaders. Lieutenant Mercer was joining a small group of civil engineers and a local contractor during a final inspection of renovation work. Using local contractors stimulates the local economy and offers unskilled and eager workers employment in Djibouti where unemployment is more than 50 percent and the average per capita income is \$450.

Contracts are established through a collaboration with Army civil affairs officers who roam about the Horn of Africa establishing contacts with local nationals. Servicemembers are sometimes treated as suspicious outsiders, but eventually become welcomed guests, as on this day when Lieutenant

Mercer inspected classrooms renovated with ceiling fans, electric lights, a fresh coat of paint and a blackboard to replace a thin sheet of painted plywood that had previously served in its stead. Teachers speaking French attempted to continue classes during the visit, but an eruption of huge smiles and friendly waves occurred as their visitors passed outside each classroom.

“That’s what makes this job so incredible,” Lieutenant Mercer said of the warm and enthusiastic response he always receives from students. “You get a lot of return from the kids. Most of your return is through their eyes.”

But it could only be described as controlled chaos less than an hour prior at a different school when

Lieutenant Mercer entered through the gate of the Al-Horiya Primary School. He was there to meet with school officials to discuss the upcoming renovation project soon to get underway.

As he exited his truck, he was swarmed by young students eager to touch and speak to the American dressed in a desert camouflaged uniform. Although their enthusiasm matched that of the school just visited, the classroom appearance couldn’t have been more drastic. Ceiling fans stood still above the dark and dirty room.

In about two months — the time usually required for most renovations — the school will stand in stark contrast to life outside the gate, where endless trash covers a landscape of dilapidated homes and

## A camel stands among the misty mountains

of the small town of Arta where a clinic is being renovated. Camels and goats are a common sight to the approximately 1,400 coalition members who are attempting to defeat terrorism in the region by helping local nationals.



## Teacher Fa-touma Abdouckader stands at the window

of her fourth-grade classroom at the Al-Horiya Primary School in Djibouti where she discusses her hopes that Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa efforts will improve the lives of her people and prevent the spread of terrorism.



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small shops pieced together with wood and corrugated steel.

## Delayed dividends

Less visible and more intangible results might not be seen for years to come, but they could be significant, said Capt. Joshua Close from inside the communications directorate at Camp Lemonier. The camp is a former French Foreign Legion outpost and now headquarters for CJTF-HOA.

“You may not see the rewards until 20 years down the line, but you know the seeds are being planted. You just hope the relationship continues to thrive and grow throughout the years,” said Captain Close, a 26-year-old from Omaha, Neb., who volunteered for the 120-day deployment from his home station at Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

The captain and the Airmen who work for him are worlds away from New York City where the fight against terrorism erupted Sept. 11, 2001, but he sees the Horn of Africa mission as the “front end of the war on terror,” and he likes the way the war is being waged.

“We’re not fighting with beans and bullets, but with school dedications and hospital renovations,” he said. If they’re successful, he said, today’s younger generation will grow up thinking of Americans as allies and become participants in the global war on terrorism.

But the way the war is being waged in the Horn of Africa doesn’t make it any less real — or dangerous. The Horn of Africa was chosen for this alternative approach to the war because the region offers free-

dom of movement for terrorists at border crossings, ports and by air, as well as a source of safe havens for terrorists and the business and financial networks that support them.

“The terrorists are working just as hard as we are,” said Staff Sgt. Robert Henshaw, a CJTF-HOA communications systems administrator deployed from Ramstein. That’s why he feels a sense of urgency even though the war on terrorism is often viewed in terms of years or decades.

“The quicker we can get to them to show them we’re here to help them,” he said, the greater the chance of deterring future acts of terrorism. “I like the goal of the mission. We’re here trying to take the country back — Africa for Africa, and it’s actually paying off.”

## Building bridges — literally

A major player for the coalition is the 823rd Expeditionary RED HORSE Squadron from Hurlburt Field, Fla. During its six-month stint that ended in January, most of its 35-member team worked in unfamiliar territory for RED HORSE engineers — outside the gate.

Used primarily for on-base infrastructure work such as runway repair in a deployed setting, the civil engineers were not only focused on projects just outside the gate, but hundreds of miles away. At remote sites such as Gode, Ethiopia, six engineers replaced 50,000 square feet of rotten bridge decking that had caused injuries to livestock. They’ve also been busy in Hurso, Ethiopia, where another team constructed a 1,000-square-foot clinic.

“We’re building a friendship that hopefully is a generational thing so they grow up thinking we’re the good guys and they’re [terrorists] the bad guys,” said Master Sgt. Dave Crocker, the RED HORSE first sergeant. How-



## A RED HORSE engineer from Hurlburt Field, Fla.,

smoothes a stretch of road in the barren landscape of Djibouti where about 50 Airmen help build relationships along with bridges, roads, schools and clinics in inhospitable terrain where temperatures exceed 140 degrees.

ever, such endeavors are not new to local inhabitants. Terrorists have undertaken similar projects in the past to influence local natives, Sergeant Crocker noted, but with a few major differences. RED HORSE sticks around to finish the job with no other agenda than to stabilize the region by helping people help themselves.

Converting words into deeds is particularly relevant when dealing with tribal elders, said Lieutenant Mercer, who has sat in mud huts with thatched roofs discussing proposed projects with tribal leaders. Their people identify themselves more with their tribes than the country they live in. “The tribe is powerful,” he said. “If we make friends with one village, we can make friends with the entire tribe.”

Finishing the job hasn’t come without challenges for the RED HORSE crew. Mending the 22-mile Hol-Hol Road that provides a vital link for food and supplies between Djibouti City and Hol-Hol meant working 12-hour days in what’s described as the hottest, continually inhabited place on earth. Temperatures exceed 140 degrees in Djibouti.

However, it’s not necessarily the bigger jobs that bring about the most significant change. While the previous military civil engineer team worked at a school renovation project, one of the crew noticed there weren’t any girls at the school and asked why. Because there were no toilets for them. A separate toilet was built and now girls attend school alongside boys, said Capt. Scott Stanford, the RED HORSE detachment officer in charge. As a result,

that particular issue is addressed with every project.

## Endless horizons

There are no small issues for Lt. Col. Dave Mackenzie when it comes to providing combat search and rescue for a mission encompassing more than 2 million square miles of the country.

“It’s not your traditional CSAR,” said the commander of the 71st Expeditionary Rescue Squadron. The unit flies the HC-130P Combat King used primarily for aerial refueling helicopters involved in a search and rescue mission for downed pilots. However, while in Djibouti, his customers could range from an injured civilian employee for a non-governmental aid agency, to a RED HORSE engineer taken hostage by terrorists or Soldiers in a situation as virulent as the Black Hawk helicopter shoot-down in Somalia.

Such adaptability of the 71st ERS is an example of a new way of doing business. That also defines the way the war on terrorism is being waged, said Command Chief Master Sgt. Curtis Brownhill at the conclusion of a visit to Djibouti on behalf of Central Command.

“The Horn of Africa is a preferred model,” said Chief Brownhill, likening the mission to a sort of reversal to the Marshal Plan of World War II in which the enemy was dealt a devastating military defeat followed by a military assisted reconstruction program.

“Here at HOA you can almost flip it over. We’re winning the war without firing a shot.” ☺

## Marine Capt. Jennifer Grieves maneuvers the probe

of her CH-53E helicopter to receive fuel from an HC-130P Combat King belonging to the 71st Expeditionary Rescue Squadron from Moody Air Force Base, Ga.

